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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

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TAGS: PGOV OREP ECON PTER MASS TS
SUBJECT: CODEL INOUYE PROMOTES US-TUNISIAN TIES

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During their November 25-26 visit to Tunisia, Senators Daniel Inouye and Ted Stevens were warmly welcomed by Minister of National Defense Kamel Morjane and MFA Secretary of State Saida Chtioui. The GOT officials, who apologized President Ben Ali was unavailable to meet the Senators on a Sunday, stressed Tunisia's political, economic and social achievements under Ben Ali's leadership. They shared the GOT's efforts to combat the threat of regional terrorism and promote regional cooperation. The Senators expressed their appreciation of Tunisia's efforts and voiced their support for additional foreign assistance for the Tunisian military. Chtioui highlighted Tunisian support for USG efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, Iraq, Afghanistan and Darfur. She also expressed Tunisian concerns over the draft Global Online Freedom Act. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) During their November 25-26 visit to Tunisia, Senators Inouye and Stevens were accompanied by Charles Houy and Margaret Ashworth, Professional Staff Members from the Senate Defense Appropriation Committee. In addition to their government meetings, the delegation also visited the American Battle Monuments Commission North Africa Cemetery and were hosted by the Ambassador for a dinner with GOT officials, members of Parliament, and business and cultural contacts.

TUNISIA: A SUCCESS STORY

¶3. (C) Both Minister Morjane and SecState Chtioui stressed the quality of US-Tunisian relations and Tunisia's social and economic achievements. Chtioui said that under the leadership of President Ben Ali, Tunisia had undertaken "deep political reforms" and that the human rights environment had also improved. She added that Tunisia hopes to expand its trade, investment, science and technology, infrastructure, security and defense relations with the United States. Senator Inouye said that he was reassured Tunisia had maintained such a steady course of development. He told Chtioui that he hoped to spread the lessons and message of Tunisia to other countries in the world.

SUPPORTING TUNISIAN CT EFFORTS

¶4. (C) Chtioui told CODEL Inouye that Tunisia seeks to combat the root causes of terrorism, while recognizing that regional security threats require deterrent mobilization. She

expressed the GOT's appreciation for US support for GOT counterterrorism efforts, which allows Tunisia's limited resources to focus on education and development. Morjane highlighted the threat of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and said that Tunisia CT efforts are part of the broader Global War on Terrorism. Inouye said the Senate had increased the FY-09 foreign assistance for Tunisia as a demonstration of Congressional support for Tunisia's success.

He asked how the Tunisian military interacts with national security forces. Morjane explained that there are "many levels" of cooperation between the Ministries of Defense and Interior. He said the two ministries were working to increase interoperability and conduct joint training.

¶5. (C) Senator Stevens asked if the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) included political and security cooperation. Both Chtioui and Morjane noted that the Western Sahara issue made greater AMU cooperation difficult. However, Morjane said that Tunisian-Algerian cooperation along Tunisia's western borders was working well, especially at the operational level. Local commanders can coordinate their efforts on the ground without having to seek central authority. Morjane added that Tunisia is trying to ensure Algerian pressure in the border regions did not drive terrorists across the border into Tunisia.

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

¶6. (C) More broadly, Chtioui told Senators Inouye and Stevens that the United States could count on Tunisia's full support for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian issue and highlighted that Foreign Minister Abdallah was currently en route to the Annapolis conference. Tunisia is always ready to support US efforts to promote a just and lasting peace, said Chtioui. She also noted Tunisia's support for Iraq's national integrity and training the GOT had provided for Iraqi officials over the past year, funded by the Japanese. Chtioui added that Tunisia was prepared "to do the same" for Afghanistan. Turning to Sudan, Chtioui told CODEL Inouye that Tunisia is trying to help, but that it was hard to convince the Government of Sudan to accept their assistance because of the lack of a positive dialogue.

SMITH ACT: CONTROLLING THE INTERNET A "NECESSITY"

¶7. (C) Chtioui asked the Senators to support Tunisia's removal from the Global Online Freedom Act, sponsored by Rep. Chris Smith. She stressed that Tunisia must take "reasonable safeguards" to protect foreigners from terrorism and therefore blocks websites that advocate terrorist acts. Senator Stevens asked if the act would have a negative impact on Tunisia. Chtioui said that Tunisia was being "condemned" for trying to prevent violence. She complained that individuals who are called terrorists elsewhere, for trying to access terrorist information on the Internet, are called "victims" in Tunisia. Chtioui added that it was a "necessity" for Tunisia to control the Internet to prevent the spread of hatred and violence. Senators Inouye and Stevens said that he would look into the bill upon his return to Washington.

¶8. (C) Comment: CODEL Inouye's visit was a valuable opportunity for a high-level exchange of views with the GOT. Several senior GOT officials and private Tunisians have expressed great appreciation recently for the renewed interest members of Congress are taking in Tunisia. End Comment.

¶9. (SBU) CODEL Inouye did not clear this cable.
GODEC